

KAISIKA MAHAATHMIYAM

ஸ்ரீதேவி பூமிதேவி சமேத ஸ்ரீஅழகியநம்பி - திருக்குறுங்குடி

KAISIKA MAHAATHMIYAM

(Based on Commentary of Parasara Bhattar)

&

Its Observance at

SRIRANGAM and THIRUKKURUNGUDI

By

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Published by

Shri.A.NAMBI

(Retired Tahsildar)

12/49 - North Mada Street, Thirukkurungudi - 627 115.

Phone : 04635 – 265117

Price: - 30/-

PREFACE

I was taken by surprise when one fine morning, Mr. Nambi, a retired Tahsildar, from Thirukkurungudi, suggested over telephone that I could help him in bringing out an English version of Kaisika Mahaathmiyam. I hesitated to say an immediate "yes", as I was quite diffident on my competence to write on the topic. But I reluctantly accepted the idea as saying "no" would be crude and hurt Mr. Nambi, who, at a ripe old age, has taken it as his life's mission to ceaselessly render service to Emperuman at Thirukkurungudi temple, sung by four Aazhwars. Also, my friend, Mr. G.R. Krishnan, a philanthropist, who has been consistently encouraging efforts in the promotion of Sri Vaishnavism, insisted on my writing for the benefit of English knowing people to understand and appreciate the Vedic tale.

The writing could not have been possible without the help of Mr. A. Krishnamachari of Sri Vaishnava Sri of Srirangam, who very promptly sent me a valuable publication in Tamil—Kaisika Mahaathmiyam by Sahithya Siromani Sthanigam Parthasarathy Iyengar who had served as Librarian in Srirangam Devasthanam. This 1937 publication contains the commentary of Parasara Bhattar and elaborately deals with the way the Kaisikam is observed in Srirangam and Thirukkurungudi temples. Based on the details in this book and culling information from internet for certain updates, I have completed the English version—without being unfaithful to the original earlier works in Tamil—seeking the blessings of my Aacharyan Srimad Azhagiya Singar of Sri Ahobila Math and also that of Emperuman at Thirukkurungudi.

Yagapuram K. Raghunathan
Chennai.

Sri Ramajayam

KAISIKA MAHAATHMIYAM

(Based on the commentary of Parasara Bhattar)

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RELEVANCE

If music gives expression to emotion, singing the glory of the Lord saves a person from the power and penalty of sin and confers eternal happiness.

Illustrations to demonstrate this easy way to attain the bliss are abundant as one takes a journey into the world of Hinduism. It is in this context that Kaisika Mahaathmiyam gains the relevance.

It is a simple story but the significance of the narration lay in the message it conveys ultimately for righteous living.

THE AVATAR

Among the Avatars most unique of the Lord (Emperuman) is His appearance twice as Varaha, the form of a wild boar.

Once, Mother Earth (who is none else but the Goddess Bhoomi Piratti) sank into the sea to save herself from the tyranny of an Asura called Hiranyaksha. Responding to her cry, Lord Mahavishnu, came as a boar, fatally knocked down the Asura, retrieved her the position and consoled her by revealing the message of the Vedas. The earth was again populated and the Ten incarnations of the Lord refer to this appearance of Varaha.

His grace

The second time when He showed up was to save the earth from a great devastation called Pralayam (deluge). Lifting the earth, drowned by sea, on His tusker teeth, Varaha placed the planet back in its proper orbit.

Even as He wiped the sorrow of Bhoomi Piratti and was comforting her, the Mother Earth expressed sadness at the sufferings of the people and sought the benign blessings of Emperuman on them and beseeched Him to show an easy way to attain salvation for those submerged in the ocean of family bonds and affinity.

Readily acceding to the request of the Piratti whose upper most concern was the welfare of her children on earth, Emperuman suggested that by performing musical offering and singing His glory in great faith, the devotees could please Him and gain moksha, the ultimate universal bliss. Stressing on this further, He narrated the story of Nam Paaduvaan, an ardent devotee who adopted the mode of music to gain His grace.

The storyline

The stage set for this anecdote, rendered by Emperuman Himself, is Thirukkurungudi, the abode of the considerate Lord, situated in sylvan surroundings with sprawling paddy fields and palm groves. Thick woods and serene hills of Mahendra Parvatham provide a beautiful backdrop to this tranquil rural temple, one of the 108 kshethrams, revered in Naalaayira Divya Prabandham, the Tamil work of antiquity, considered by Sri Vaishnavas as God's own words, spoken through the poetry of Alwar Saints.

The fragrance of Kurungudi

The beauty of Thirukurungudi, located some 40 km from Tirunelveli in the southern part of India, can well be imagined by the rendering in Divya Prabhandam by Thirumangai Mannan whose vivid portrayal in Periya Thirumozhi highlights Nature at its best in this Vamana kshetram of Lord Narayana housing Nindra Nambi, as the presiding deity, with his consorts.

The Alwar says:...."Kurungudi is where in the cool waters of lake, fragrant lotus blossoms and swans with red feet nestle with their mates; baby crane perches itself on a low branch and eats on the fish from the mouth of its mother; soft, red-footed water-hens search for worms for their mates, wading through ripe paddy fields with sharp eyes; night and day the bees hum sweetly while the fragrance of the Kuravu trees spread everywhere in Kurungudi where Mullai creepers sprout tender white buds in the backyards; sharp-beaked water-egrets rejoice with their mates in fields filled with water birds....."

Nam Paaduvaan

On the outskirts of this lovely shrine village was born Nam Paaduvaan. Though he hailed from a low caste, "Chandala", he was steadfast in his devotion to Lord Nambi and every evening he would sing the praise of Emperuman, standing far away from the temple precincts.

There came a testing time for his dedicated religious worship. As the day was marked by Kaisika Ekadasi in sukla Paksham Karthikai, the eighth month in Tamil calender, Nam Paaduvan, who observed fast and kept awake, set out in the night towards the temple to render hymns. On the way, he was waylaid by a hungry Brahma Raakshas (demon) which wanted Paaduvaan as its prey.

Adamant Raakshas

Though not scared or interested in life, Paaduvaan was happy that his body could satiate the Brahma Raakshas and relieve its hunger. Yet, the Bagavathothaman (devotee) was sad that his life would end without singing the praise of Lord Nambi, completing his vratham (vow) and paying obeisance before His temple as he had been doing over the years.

Paaduvaan sought the mercy of the Brahma Raakshas to let him go to the temple, fulfill his musical offering to the Lord and return when the Brahma Raakshas could consume him and satisfy its hunger. The demon would not believe that Paaduvaan would come back. The Raakshas saw the plea of Paaduvaan as a ruse to escape. "I know you will not come back and I will not let you go", it said and contended that "no one who had escaped from the grip of Brahma Raakshas would return and give himself again".

Persuaded further, Nam Paaduvan made as many as 18 promises of which, except one, all others were turned down by the Raakshas. These promises (detailed exhaustively in subsequent pages) set forth the virtues a person should adopt in life. The violation of the promises would make him a great sinner, Nam Paaduvaan reasoned.

Ultimate force

What made the Raakshas to accede to the plea of Nam Paaduvan was his pledge that "if I do not return I will earn the curse of breaking the divine law of not to equate Lord Narayana, the unparalled and ultimate Parama Purusha and Para Brahma, with other devathas (deities)".

Taking also into account the devotion of Paaduvan to the Lord, his vedic intelligence and exposition, sincerity and deep rooted faith in Vaishnavam, the Raakshas let him go.

The Return To Woods

The Paaduvaan lived up to his word. He completed his vratham by spending most part of the night in front of the temple singing His greatness in various raagaas (notes) and happily returned to the fold of the Brahma Raakashas.

But this was not before the Paaduvaan was stopped in mid-forest by an unknown person who insisted on knowing why he was going at such a hurried pace. Explaining his determination to offer himself as food to the Brahma Raakshas, the Paaduvaan recalled the promise he had made earlier. " If I do not find the Raakshas in the place where I saw it last, I will go in search of it in the woods".

With a view to testing the resoluteness of Paaduvaan, the stranger, who was none else but Lord Vishnu, sought to dissuade him from proceeding further saying that it was rare to see a noble Raakshas as Vibhishana and all other evil forces should be shown no mercy and deserve to be eliminated.

Quickly reacting to this, Nam Paaduvaan, a man of moral excellence, said, "it is better to die than fail to comply with a promise made earlier. I am a person who keeps promises. And, even if I vacillate, my in-born nature is such that it will not allow me to bend to convenience". He then moved towards the forest, carrying fully the blessings of the Lord.

Drink my blood, eat my flesh

Succeeding in his search, Paaduvan reached the Brahma Raakshas and first expressed his gratitude to the demon for permitting him to go and sing the glory of Maha Vishnu who was in the form of Azhagiya Nambi at Thirukkurungudi. "Now I am ready to satisfy your hunger. You can drink my blood, eat my flesh and fill your stomach", he said.

Different Demand

The Brahma Raakshas who was in a frightful mood till then, however, changed its mind and decided not to consume Nam Paaduvan. Showing no interest in the physical form of Paaduvaan, it made a different demand this time. "If you want to save your life and go unhurt, you should part in my favour the fruits (palan) you had acquired from the musical offering you had made earlier in the night to Emperuman, it said.

As a person who cares more for what he had said earlier and promised, Nam Paaduvaan reminded the commitment he had made and how he had returned without fail as the Brahma Raakshas had wanted him to do. "You can swallow me but I will not part with the fruits of my musical offering", Paaduvaan told the Raakshas.

Climb Down

Listening to the reasoning of Paaduvaan, the Raakshas climbed down further and insisted that he be given at least half of the gain Paaduvan had made through the musical offering made to the Lord. "Hey, devotee, you need not give me your gain in full but you can go away unhurt by making over to me at least half of your Palan", it said.

Paaduvaan is not the kind to be enticed. "You had earlier wanted my flesh and blood which I am prepared to part with readily. But, now you ask me to give you the gain by my devotion through music. I will not do that and you cannot ask me anything other than my physical form," he asserted.

Music And Blood

Retorting with greater vehemence, the Raakshas demanded that it be given just the palan of the music Paaduvaan rendered during one Yamam (time reckoned in ancient days in Tamil Nadu). "You can give this and quickly join your children and family".

An assertive and courageous Paaduvaan would not budge and rejected with contempt the plea of the Raakshas and told him " I will not give you the Palan of even the songs I rendered during one Yamam. Music is in my blood and if you want you can drink it and satisfy your hunger".

Realisation

The Raakshas realized that Nam Paaduvaan is no ordinary person who will break his promise even at the threat to his life. It also perceived that by his utter trust in the Lord and faithful devotion, Paaduvan was conscious of the essence of Sarvam (universe) and Vaishamyam (free from all worldly attachment) and also the strength and influence of his music to Him.

It now addressed him as a Mahanubhava (no ordinary man but a great personality) and chose to completely surrender itself to Nam Paaduvan and begged, "You must give me the fruit of at least one of the many songs you performed this night before the sanctum of Lord Vishnu and liberate me from this form of Raakshas".

Tell Me The Sin

Moved by the pleading, Paaduvaan asked the Raakshas what sin it had committed to be born a demon. The Raakshas, who by now gained the memory of its poorva janmam (previous birth), said he was a Brahmin called Soma Sarma and he ventured to perform a yaga (sacred ritual) to invoke the blessings of devathas.

But because of his arrogance, lack of understanding and incorrect utterance of mantras (vedic verses) he earned a severe curse and without completing the yaga died in five days. And, thus he had gained the form of Brahma Raakshas in this birth. "As you are a great devotee, I am totally surrendering myself to you to get salvation", it said.

Raakshas attains Moksha

Lord Varaha, who was hitherto narrating the story to Bhoomi Piratti, said as the Raakshas Vibhishan was "given the asylum earlier by Me", Nam Paaduvaan now decided on Abhaya Pradhanam (granting of freedom) to the Brahma Raakshas which had surrendered to him.

Paaduvan told the demon "this night I sang a Pann (Raga) called Kaisikam. By the effect of that Palan, you will be freed from the form of Raakshas and attain Moksha (heaven). Thus, the Brahma Raakshas, blessed by Paaduvaan shed its form, became a Bhaktha (devotee), born in a good family, and attained Heaven. Nam Paaduvan continued his devotion with greater force for a long time and ultimately reached the abode of the Lord.

Salutary Effect Of Kaisikam

The narration over, Emperuman told Naachiyar (Bhoomi Piratti) that, as in the case of Nam Paaduvaaan, whoever sings at my sanctum the Pann (devotional music) in Kaisikam (particular Raaga) would gain the power to protect others. "Whoever sings or renders verses extolling our glory, every alphabet of such verse and music will bring them thousands of years in Heaven as Nam Paaduvan". Even during his stay in Heaven, by his sterling qualities and virtues, Paaduvan learnt sarva dharma (all righteous dictates) and earned the respect of Indira, the ruler of the God's province. As Paaduvan continued his daily ritual (Aaradhana) and was all the time hailing and singing His glory, Emperuman took him to His Periya Veedu (the ultimate abode of the Lord) and ordained him to be there forever.

Emperuman also told Bhoomi Piratti that, whoever reads or listens to Kaisika Mahaathmiyam rendered at His sanctum on Dwadasi day in sukla paksham in the month of Karthikai, would also gain His divine favour.

The Mother Goddess was happy, felt fully relieved from the stress of Pralayam and expressed her gratitude to Mahavishnu for His compassion and said, "Let divine music be the source to inspire the people to seek His grace".

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PRATHIGNAI (VOW)
EXTRACT OF THE 18 PROMISES MADE BY NAM PAADUVAN TO BRAHMA RAKSHAS.

Every divine story has a strong message to convey and sets the standard for virtuous living by people.

The special feature of Kaisika Mahaathmiyam is that it not only shows the easy way to attain His grace through devotional music and rendering of divine verses but also lists 18 qualities of moral rectitude which should be followed rigidly and the violation of even one of them would make a person a great sinner and attract divine punishment.

Nam Paaduvan And His Vow

In his effort to pacify the hungry Brahma Raakshas which wanted to devour him, Nam Paaduvan, an ardent devotee of Mahavishnu, assures the demon that he will return after fulfilling his musical offering to the Lord at Thirukkurungudi temple and that the Raakshas can then consume him.

As it will not let him go, Paaduvan makes the following prathignai (solemn assurance), the violation of which, he points out, will make him a great sinner:

1. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of breaking a solemn promise (sathyam);

2. If I do not return, I will earn the grave sin of committing the felony of lust and having intimacy with the wife of another person;

3. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of showing discrimination while serving food to persons eating along with me;

4. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of a person who takes back a piece of land given as a gift to a Brahmin;

5. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of finding fault and abandoning a beautiful woman in her old age after living with her during her youthful days;

6. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of a person who, after performing tharpanam (a ritual) on a new moon day (Ammavasai), indulges in lasciviousness.

7. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of abusing a person who chose to serve food;

8. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of a person who assures that he will give his daughter in wedding but goes back on his word later;

9. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of a person who eats without taking a bath on the days marked by Sashti, Ashtami, Ammavasai, and Chathurthasi,

10. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of a person who declines to give a gift as assured earlier;

11. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of a person who lures the wife of his friend who had helped him a great deal;

12. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of a person who has extra marital relations with the wife of Acharyan and also the wife of the King;

13. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of a person who marries two women but disregards one and loves the other;

14. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of a person who abandons his youthful wife, a pathivratha solely dependant on him;

15. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of a person who drives away a herd of thirsty cows seeking water;

16. If I do not return, I will be earning the sin of a person who commits "Pancha Mahapathagam" (five grave offences listed by elders);

17. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of worshipping other devathas disregarding Lord Vaasudeva, and

18. If I do not return, I will be committing the sin of a person who compares Sarveswaran (Emperuman) and equates Him with other devathas.

The Vows And The Moral

The moral conveyed by the above assurances of Nam Paaduvan is that even an evil force like Brahma Raakshas is convinced of the essence of virtues.

As it is at the 18th prathignai that the Brahma Raakshas let Nam Paaduvan to go and come back, it emerges, that the last prathignai is particularly significant. For, anyone equating Lord Naarayana with other devathas will be facing the wrath of the Supreme and there will be no way for them to attain moksha and there will be no let-up for them from worldly sufferings.

GREATNESS OF KAISIKAM AND ITS OBSERVANCE IN THIRUKKURUNGUDI AND SRIRANGAM TEMPLES

The narration of Kaisika Mahaathmiyam is found in the 48th chapter of Varaha Puranam. It contains 92 slokas. The pride of place in bringing to light this fascinating Vedic incident is attributed in scriptures to Parasara Bhattar, one of the greatest religious leaders of Vaishnava fold.

Son of Koorthazhwar, an Acharya and disciple dearest to Sri Ramanuja, Bhattar was precociously well versed in Sanskrit and Tamil. In a life span of just 30 years, he emerged a distinguished poet and philosopher of his time and had authored more than a dozen works.

Unfolding Of The Account

Among them is his elaborate commentary (vyaakyaanam) on the 92 slokas of Kaisika Mahaatmiyam. It appears that no saints, Aazhwars or Aacharyas prior to Bhattar had ventured to unfold the sacred account of Nam Paaduvan and the supreme effect of Kaisikam.

The earlier publications on Kaisika Mahaathmiyam say that even the Aazhwars, who had performed Mangalaasaasanam (singing in praise) of the Lord at Thirukkurungudi, had not referred to Kaisika vrudhdantham (story) in their verses. They conclude that it was Bhattar who sank into the Vedic ocean and brought to eminence the jewel of Kaisikam.

TRIAL AND MOKSHA

Bhattar did not stop with just writing the commentary. Driven by a strong desire, he chose a Sukla Paksha Dwadasi day in the month of Karthikai to render before Lord Ranganatha, the presiding deity at Srirangam, the Vedic verses of Kaisikam and his vyaakyanam.

A highly pleased Emperuman stood by the boon he had assured to Bhoomi Piratti earlier during His appearance as Varaha, and blessed immediate placement for Bhattar in His Nithya Vibhuthi (transcendental spiritual universe).

Bhattar was taken to the place where he would perform kainkaryam (service) to the Lord and attain an exalted State. Those in Nithya Vibhuthi, it is said, would have the bhagyam (blessing) to render service and have uninterrupted darshan of the Lord.

Though Emperuman chose Thirukkurungudi as the locale for Kaisika Mahaathmiyam, it was at Srirangam where it was put to trial, so to say. One reason for Bhattar's choice of Srirangam for his rendering, it is assumed, may be because of his awareness of how Sri Aandal, who was none other than Bhoomi Piratti, followed the upadesam of Maha Vishnu to sing His glory and gained His grace there.

Agama shastras, they say, stipulate that sacred scriptures should be read and songs rendered as the Lord wakes up at dawn on Sukla Paksha Dwadasi in the month of Karthikai. This practice is called Udthaana Uthsavam.

Earlier to Kaisika Mahaathmiyam, they may have read some other scriptures at the time of Udhaanothsavam. But as ordained by the Lord, Bhattar, by his rendering, had exalted Kaisika Mahaathmiyam as a scripture to be read on the occasion. And this practice is followed even today by the successors of Bhattar.

As Bhattar had established the greatness of Varaha Avatara and revealed the essence of Kaisika Mahaathmiyam, Sri Vedanta Desikan, renowned Vaishnava Acharya, had also brought out subsequently the merit of Varaha Saramaslokam (verses to surrender before the Lord).

It is said that mostly following the interpretation by Bhattar, Sri Desikan had brought out the special features of the whole Kaisika episode and Varaha Avatara. So, while enjoying the commentary of Kaisika Mahaathmiyam, it becomes essential for a person also to read the works of Sri Desikan in order to fully understand and appreciate the subject.

Kaisikam at Srirangam

The time for observing Kaisika uthsavam and sastra vidhi (rules and procedures) is clearly laid down for the Srirangam temple.

Here, the start up for the uthsavam (Anguraarpanam) is done on the evening of Dasami. On Ekadasi day, the morning rituals over, the Lord will be taken to Chandanu Mandapam where the thirumanjanam will be performed. After offering thaligai to the deity and distribution of theertha prasadam (holy water) Emperuman will be taken back to the sanctum sanctorum. The offering (nivedanam) of milk etc usually made in the night will, on this Ekadasi day, be offered to Him in the evening itself and the sanctum sanctorum will then remain closed.

PROCESSION OF THE LORD

The doors will be opened in the night at 10 and Emperuman will be taken in a procession to Pagal Paththu mandapam for the uthsavam. Excepting his usual Neela Naayagam on his chest, Perumal this night will not adorn any other ornament and He will be seen wearing a simple saadara (similar to a jacket) and sporting a cap.

On reaching the mandapam, the deity will be seated on a simhasanam and a box containing "pachai vadam" (silken cloth in various hues) will be brought by Sri Paadam thangigal, persons privileged to carry on their shoulders Emperuman seated on a sort of palanquin, made of wooden plank borne on poles.

PACHAI VADAM

In all, the Lord will be presented with 360 pachai vadam (silken shawls), one by one. And, every time, a pachai vadam is presented, the Archakar will offer thaambulam including Borneol flakes (pachai karpooram) and present a haarthi lighting camphor.

ARAYAR SEVAI

Even as the priest begins to present to the deity pachai vadam, each of the vastram (shawl) in distinctly different colours, temple employees will bring Arayars (descendants of Naathamuni, a great Vaishnavite Acharya) and present them before the Lord.

Arayar sevai is recognized as a performing art and, after receiving temple honours, they will recite the paasurams of Azhwars particularly those relating to Thirukkurungudi, the scene of Kaisika Mahathmiyam. Appearing with cone like caps, two cymbals and garlands, stated to have been conferred to their ancestors by Maha Vishnu himself, the Arayars also render abhinaya, a sort of realistic expression and quote the relevant commentary. Though well versed in Divya Prabhandam and other scriptural writings, it is said that Arayars will strictly adhere to the guidelines given by their ancestors. In the course of their rendering, the Lord, in appreciation, will give the Arayars the offerings made to Him.

Entry of Bhattar

Even as the Aravars are continuing their performance, the Bhattar (in the lineage), conducted to the temple with honours from his residence, will remain at the Mandapam. Aravars rendering over, the Bhattar will be presented before the Lord. The Archakar will receive the Sri Kosam (scriptures) on Kaisika Mahathmiyam from the Bhattar and place it at the feet of the Lord. After receiving theertham, chandan, garland and satakopam, the Bhattar will be given the text of Kaisika Mahaathmiyam which he will read before the ghoshti (assembly of learned persons and devotees). In between his reading, the Bhattar will, in appreciation by the Lord, be given, as many as ten times, the offerings, including pachai karpooram, made to Him. Once he finishes reading the text, the temple employees will take him back to his residence.

Then, renderings from the Vedas and other temple rituals will go on and well before dawn, the deity will be taken back to the sanctum sanctorum. En route, the Bhattar will again come and pay his obeisance and follow the Lord even as Aravars continue to sing His praise.

At the flight of steps leading to the sanctum sanctorum, persons belonging to a sect called saaththatha vaishnavas will shower on the lord flowers sprinkled with the powder of pachai karpooram. It will be a great sight to witness, how quickly and with a fascinating jerk, the Lord is taken over the steps and enters his sanctum sanctorum.

Happy over the presentation of Kaisika Mahaathmyam, [illegible] orders the sthanikar (administrator) to see off Bhattar. The garland of the Lord will be presented to the Bhattar and after [illegible] Theertham. The archakar will honour Bhattar with [illegible] Sri Satakopam (also known as Sri Satari, the Lotus feet of the Lord mounted on cone shaped pedestal made of gold/silver and properly consecrated. Touching the head of a devotee with Sri Satari is considered a holy way of conveying God's blessings).

The Bhattar will then be taken to his residence in a [illegible] (a sort of a carriage in a palanquin). He will be presented garlands and conferred honours at various sannidhis in the temple, [illegible] at Garuda Mandapam and at Koorathazhwar sannidhi. This tradition comes down of the great Kaisika Mahaathmyam, and is observed year after year with the same solemn devotion at Srirangam.

AT THIRUKKURUNGUDI

There is a distinctly different appeal in the observance of Kaisika Ekadasi at Thirukkurungudi, the birth place of the Mahaathmyam. Besides the temple ritual, the emphasis given here is on enacting well past midnight the celebrated story of Nam Paaduvan as a dance drama.

However, this traditional play called Kaisiki Natakam suffered a setback in 1955, mainly for want of patronage and lay dormant for 44 years. Thanks to the efforts of Anita Ratnam, an accomplished dancer and choreographer, and her team including Prof. Ramanujam, theatre director, the tradition has been revived. It has been skillfully adapted to the present day situation without any great deviation or let up in its divine quality or in conveying the Lord's message through Nam Paaduvaan.

The way how the Kaisiki Natakam was enacted prior to 1955 is quite interesting. Even ten days prior to Ekadasi, the three main artistes of the play, Nam Paaduvan, Brahma Raakshas, and old man Nambi, will, after [illegible] in the Thirukkurungudi temple, start the practice and repeatedly rehearse the story at the nearby Krishnan temple on the banks of the [illegible] river. They will observe a rigid vratham and fast on Ekadasi day. The role of Nam Paaduvan and Nambi were played by the temple [illegible] and that of Brahma Raakshas by [illegible]. While the others would observe the vratham in their residence, the person playing Brahma Raakshas would, after his bath, remain in the temple premises and would not go out.

Past 10 at the night on the day of Ekadasi, the processional deity of the presiding Lord Emperumaan, Nambi, will be brought with His consorts to the nearby Kaisika Mandapam. Even before His arrival, all Aazhwars and Acharyas would be seated in a row. On arrival of the Jeeyar, Mutt head of Thirukkurungudi temple, the priests will begin the ritual and present the offerings to Emperuman. The [illegible] Naachiyar (Goddess housed in a separate sannidhi in the precincts of the temple) will then come and join the assembly of the Lord in Kaisika Mandapam. The [illegible] offering over, the Jeevar will leave for his Mutt.

It is then the time for the curtains to go up for the Kaisika Natakam. Emperuman in Kaisika Mandapam will be seated facing east. There is a big hall outside Kaisika Mandapam and it is there the dance-drama will be enacted by the three artistes following faithfully the palm leaf manuscript in the possession of the daasis.

According to a 1937 publication, the author of the script is not known but Anita Ratnam in an article traces it to one Veerabhadra Nattuvanar of the 15th century. The artistes, with great involvement portray the vaibhavam of Emperuman and vividly bring out the tale of Kaisikam. It is said that even though unaware of how clearly the writings in the manuscripts should be uttered, the artistes would still make a sort of presentation.

When the stage is set to begin the drama, the person playing the role of the Brahma Raakshas will emerge from behind the temple to drum beat (Mela-thaalam) and be taken to a room in the northern corner of Kaisika Mandapam where he will worship the mask of Raakshas and put it on. The moment the artiste wears the mask covering his head and face, he attains a force as if he is the personification of Brahma Raakshas. He is then taken to the stage and the drama begins. The play, witnessed by overflowing devotees in the hall, occupying all vantage positions, goes on two or three hours past midnight. The performance of the story of Kaisikam over, the artistes will receive temple honours and leave for their home.

The archakar then performs thiruvaaradhana. The offerings and haarthi over, sevaa kaalam (chorus recitation from scriptures by learned persons) commences. The rendering is from Naalayira Divya Prabhandham. Subsequently, Arayar from Sri Villiputtur, the abode of Sri Aandal and Sri Rangamannar, explains, through abhinaya (theatre expression) and commentary, the features of the

paasurams relating to Thirukkurungudi in Periya Thirumozhi by Thirumangai Aazhwar in Divya Prabhandham. The scholars will continue their recitation and at the end of their presentation, Thirumangai Aazhwar will be honoured with theertha prasaadam (holy water).

After the ghoshti (group of scholars) is given the theertham, Sthanikar (temple administrator) will read the text of Kaisikam as found in the manuscript along with the commentary of Bhattar. By now, as dawn approaches, Emperuman, without leaving for His sanctum sanctorum, remains in Kaisika Mandapam itself where the next morning, Dwadasi rituals are performed. The viswaroopa ghoshti (recitation from scriptures even as His doors are open) and thirumanjanam (ritual of ablution) are performed to the Lord at Kaisika Mandapam where He stays for most part of the day. He leaves with his consorts for His sanctum sanctorum after the departure of Azhwars and Acharyas to their respective sannidhi and seeing off Thamkol Naachiyar (Goddess). In the night Emperuman, seated on Garuda, is taken out in a procession.

The rendering of Kaisika Natakam at Thirukkurungudi till 1955 was made possible by the patronage extended by scholars and locally influential devotees. With the passing away of T.V. Sundaram Iyengar, an industrial doyen hailing from the temple town, the Natakam suffered an abrupt end.

However, it was given to Anita Ratnam, great-granddaughter of Sundaram Iyengar, to revive and reconstruct the whole story. But it was not that easy and as more than four decades had elapsed by the time the idea for revival of the project was born, it required intensive research and enquiry to reconstruct the play as the palm-leaf manuscripts were difficult to lay hands on and not many were

alive to narrate how it was staged. Yet, she and her team seemed to have succeeded in gathering the details and staged the first play on November 19, 1999. Today, the Kaisika Natakam is performed, not with temple dassis (which breed exists no more) and watchman, but with a trained troupe of more than 20 actors and musicians.

The author of this book himself was a witness to the Natakam performed at the temple in 2002 and 2004. The presentation seemed to have been adapted to the existing condition. This is understandable going by the observation made in an article by Anita Ratnam.

Says she, "The traditional dancers are too old, weak and unable to remember anything substantial on which to base the reconstruction. In the circumstances, only Bharathanatyam and Bhagavata Mela traditions have been used as the starting point of movement and abhinaya explorations. The purpose is not to superimpose one or both styles on Kaisika Natakam but use it as a springboard for free expression".

Now, the mood for the Natakam is set the moment the person donning the role of Brahma Raakshas is led to Emperuman, receives His blessings and makes a frightening roar.

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AN ABODE AMID GROVES AT THE FOOT OF MAHENDRA PARVATH

Holy as the Ganges

The considerate Lord Narayana chose Thirukkurungudi as one of His abodes to establish the vedic tradition on earth and to protect the people.

According to puranic manuscripts, Ganga Matha likened the Konriyeertham at Thirukkurungudi to the holy Ganges as she explained the greatness of Sri Kurunga Kshetram to sage Naradar.

And sage Vedavyasar who heard the narration from Naradar enlightened his son Sri Vasudevapadar about the glory of the Lord at this divya desam.

Four Azhwars – Periyazhwar, Thirumazhisai Azhwar, Thirumangai Azhwar and Nammazhwar – had sung in praise of the presiding deity at Thirukkurungudi, located 24 miles (40 km) west of Tirunelveli railway station down south.

The temple town, also referred in puranas as Vamana Kshethram, Siddhashramam, Dakshin Badri and Sowgarava Kshethram can be reached only by road.

Wending along this beautiful village, one can see the sacred, the imposing Mahendra Paravath, a high hill is the river Nambiaaru also known as Kshera nadhi, Sindhu nadhi and Thirupaarkadal nadhi. The source for the river is Mahendra Parvatham, thick woods said to be rich with medicinal herbs. It is believed that the river Silambaru was created from the anklet of Vaamana.

Sundara Paripooranar

Inside the temple, the Lord addressed as Nindra Nambi, Iruntha Nambi and Kidantha Nambi is seen in standing, sitting and resting postures.

The prime among the three is Nindra Nambi who is also known as Thirukkurungudi Nambi, Azhagiya Nambi, Vaishnava Nambi and Sundara Paripooranar.

He is called Vaishnava Nambi as He received Pancha Samskaram (sanctification to gain permanent happiness in the eternal abode of Sri Hari) from Udayavar (Sri Ramanujar)

Thus, as an Acharya, the Udayavar finds a place within the sanctum sanctorum. To the left of this praahaaram are the sannidhis of Sattanathar and Bhairavar

The thaayar (goddess) in this temple is called Kurungudi Valli Naachiyar. There are separate sannidhis for Periya Piratti and Bhooma Devi.

Till a few months ago, there was a sannidhi of Lord Shiva adjoining this praahaaram but it has since been shifted elsewhere in the temple complex and the issue is now caught in a mire of controversy. Legend has it that Lord Vishnu taught Sudharsana Manthram to Shiva at this shrine.

The temple rituals are performed following the tradition of Vaikanasam.

It is stated that responding to the prayers of the Raja of Appan Kovil and his wife Udaya Nangai, the Lord Azhagiya Nambi Himself was born as their child.

This saintly child was Nammaazhwar who gave the essence of Vedas in Tamil.

Parvatta Paarai

In the southwest, not far away from the main temple are two other Nambis – Thiruppaarkadal Nambi and Malaimel Nambi.

The temple of Thirupaarkadal Nambi is just outside the town and the sanctum sanctorum of this deity also called Vaamana Perumaal is far lower than the road level.

Not far away from this temple is Sri Ramanujar Thiru Parvatta Paarai, a sheet rock on the banks of the river flowing its way from Mahendra Parvath. There is a very interesting story associated with this rock.

While on a tour to spread Sri Vaishnavism, Sri Ramanujar arrived at Thiruvananthapuram. Unable to bear the purpose of his mission, the archakas (Namboodiris) at Anantha Padmanabham temple sought the benign intervention of the deity they were worshipping.

Responding to their prayer, the Lord directed Garuda, the king of birds and carrier of Lord Vishnu, to transport Sri Ramanujar to Thirukkurungudi.

And, Garuda chose to carry Sri Ramanujar while he was fast asleep in the night and placed him gently on the Parivatta Parai. When he woke up in the morning, Sri Ramanujar was surprised that he was in the environs of Thirukkurungudi.

Unaware that his immediate disciple Vaduga, who accompanied him on his tour, was still at Tiruvananthapuram and he alone was transported to Thirukkurungudi, Sri Ramanujar called out for the sishya. As if he was waiting for this opportunity, Lord Nambi appeared as Vaduga before Sri Ramanujar and rendered services as a disciple would.

While applying the Sri Vaishnava symbol of thiruman and srichurnam on his forehead after bath, it had been the practice of Sri Ramanujar to draw a similar thilak on the forehead of his disciple Vaduga daily. As usual, he applied thiruman kaappu on the forehead of Vaduga Nambi and asked his disciple to accompany him to the temple of Lord Nambi.

On entering the temple, Vaduga Nambi disappeared after placing near the dwajasthambam (Flag Post) the basket of flowers he had just plucked.

While offering prayers to the Lord at the sanctum sanctorum, Sri Ramanujar saw on the forehead of the deity the fresh thiruman kaappu he had applied a while ago on his disciple and it did not take long for him to realize that the person who served him till then was none other than the Nambi Perumaal himself.

The Lord then told Sri Ramanujar that though He had taken several avatars and forms, He wanted to establish the greatness of the Aacharya-Sishya bhava (teacher-disciple relationship) and thus His role as Vaduga Nambi. It was then the Lord, as a disciple, received divya manthropadesam (Sri Vaishnava initiation) from Sri Ramanujar who also conferred on Him the name of Sri Vaishnava Nambi.

Besides the sannidhi of Sri Ramanujar, there is a small cave-like basement on Parivatta Paarai where the figures of Udayavar with Vaduga Nambi are found.

Malaimel Nambi

The shrine of Malaimel Nambi is situated atop a hill 10 km away from the main temple. A visit to Thirukkurungudi would be incomplete without a visit to this beautiful place of worship that can be reached only by going through a thick forest either by foot or in a jeep. And, before offering worship, it will be quite refreshing to have a bath in the fresh waters of the stream running at the foot of the hill temple.

Thirumangai Aazhwar

A prolific author among the 12 Aazhawars, Thirumangai Aazhwar has rendered 1253 of 4000 verses in Naalaayira Divya Prabhandham.

Though he was a bandit chieftain to begin with, he was subsequently reformed and he devoted his entire energy to temple-building, feeding Bhagavatas and singing the glory of the Lord.

When he beseeched Him to grant him moksha, Lord Ranganatha at Srirangam asked Thirumangai Aazhwar to serve, for sometime, at his southern abode in Thirukkurungudi. The Aazhwar did this and after sometime, was taken by the Lord to his abode, the Periya Veedu.

Befitting his closeness to the Lord, the Aazhwar has a temple for himself in the midst of a paddy field north of the Nambi temple. On the day marking Karthigai nakshaktram in the Tamil month of Karthigai, the rituals in the main temple take place after the prayer and offering of thaligai amudhu (food) to Aashwar at his temple.

Sculptural magnificence

The temple of Nambi covers an area of 18 acres having five prakarams surrounded by a massive wall, crowned with a five-tier gopuram. The Vijayanagar rulers and the Madurai Nayaks have made endowments for the temple, which boasts of many exquisite sculptures, such as Gajendra Moksham, Gopi Vasthrapaharanam,

Trivikrama Avataram and a stone work showing four horses sharing a common head.

The temple has festivals throughout the year. However the special occasions are: Vasanthotsavam in the month of Chithirai, Nammazhwar uthsavam in Vaikasi, Thirupavithrotsavam in Aavani, Navarathiri-Vijayadasami uthsavam in Purattasi, Oonjal and Manavaala Maamuni uthsavam in Aaipasi, Kaisika uthsavam in Kaarthikai, Adhyayana uthsavam in Maargazhi, and Brahmothsavam in Panguni.

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